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"FORTIFICATION."*

THIS book should be in the possession of every United States Senator and Representative, as well as of all persons interested in our national legislation. It is written by the greatest living authority on the subject, the Secretary of the Imperial Defence Committee, from whose views one may dissent only on grounds which will bear the most rigorous investigation.

The work presents the broad principles of fortification, touching but lightly on any of the engineering details. It asks what places should be fortified, why, and to what extent; it takes into account the military value of a fleet; it endeavors to secure adequate protection at the minimum cost; it displays no blind confidence in bricks and mortar, concrete and armor, but appraises them as valuable only when the men behind them are skilful and intelligent; and it reprobates the extravagance of providing at every point a maximum of defence and the uttermost complexity of devices. Some risks must be incurred, unless a nation is financially strong enough to make every harbor impregnable. Had the axioms laid down by this author been observed by our legislators during the past twenty years, we should have been spared the needless expenditure of vast sums of money, and the adoption of complicated machinery, involving the employment of skilled mechanics for their care and operation, in many places where simple mounts would have abundantly answered the purpose. In view of the noble fleet of battle-ships now bearing the American flag, over-elaboration of coast defence seems unnecessary.

The author's views and opinions have been accessible ever since the publication of the first edition of the work in 1890. They were not welcomed by military engineers—quite the contrary; but little by little, step by step, they have forced their way to practically universal acceptance, at least in theory.

The first twelve chapters, while exceedingly interesting and instructive, are not likely to receive much attention in this country, for they deal exclusively with land sieges, a branch of the art of warfare which has not concerned us since Appomattox. Nevertheless, they offer many fertile suggestions, such as:

"It seems clear that in the majority of cases the refinements of detail

* "Fortification." By Colonel Sir George Sydenham Clarke, R.E., G.C.M.G., F.R.S., etc., etc. London: John Murray.

and trace, to which theory has delighted to assign disproportionate importance, exercised no influence whatever over the issue. . . . Broad military principles—not the technical artifices which were dear to Uncle Toby and Major Dugald Dalgetty—appear to have determined the issue in the sieges of this period [the eighteenth century]. Then, as now and always, events declined to take the course prescribed for them.”

In these sentences may be found the key-note to Sir George’s teaching.

Nor is the book dull reading. The author has a delightful vein of humor, which, cropping out here and there, makes one fearful of skipping, lest choice bits be lost, such as:

“One writer, for example, discovered that the siege of Guisnes in 1558 ‘brings out very strikingly the value of hidden flanks.’ The siege of Jericho would probably afford interesting data as to the stability of revetments, if we were in possession of fuller historical details of the operation.”

Speaking of the Napoleonic era, the writer says:

“Defences were short or long, contemptible or brilliant, in accordance with the spirit of the troops, the genius and readiness of resource of their commanders, the available supply of food and ammunition, and not because the fortress was laid out on simple or complex lines. Within broad limits, the nature of the fortifications mattered exceedingly little; general tactical conditions decided the event.”

The same lesson is drawn from the episodes of our Civil War.

Nothing happened in France in 1870-71, or at Plevna in 1877, or in South Africa in 1903, to modify the author’s conclusions.

The operations around Port Arthur are clearly described and well illustrated. The reasons why they were undertaken are presented and the appropriate inferences are drawn from the conduct of the struggle. This part of the book is especially worth the reading, even if its deductions, happily, are not likely to be applicable to our case.

With the thirteenth chapter, Sir George passes to the “General Principles of Coast Defence.” What more true than his calm though disconcerting generalization:

“The primary considerations are, therefore, matters of policy dependent upon national conditions, and varying with circumstances, naval, military and geographical. Unless the coast defences of a maritime country are designed to fit into a harmonious scheme of national preparation for war, they may become sources of weakness by diverting expenditure from essential requirements. Unfortunately, this point of view is usually disregarded, and large sums have been wasted upon

fixed defences which could have no value in war, but have been successful in warping national aims and in misleading public opinion. Statesmanship is rare, and technical experts abound, while the palpable and visible means of protection that coast batteries appear to provide necessarily appeal to uninstructed minds with much greater force than the sea-going navy and the field army, upon which alone national security must ultimately depend. Thus, we have seen waves of coast defence which have strewn our shores with derelict fortifications technically bad even in their day, and now worthless, while the requirements of the field army have been uniformly ignored. Similarly, in the United States, the preposterous proposals of the 'Board on Fortification' which demanded more than five and a half millions sterling for the defence of a comparatively unassailable port such as San Francisco, have created extravagant standards attainable only by a people disposing of superabundant funds, and, if attained, adding nothing to national security.

"In this country [England] there are now signs of a rational treatment of the policy of coast defence. It is recognized that the only intelligent basis of schemes of Fortification must be sought in careful estimates of the probable scale of attack, and the Admiralty has accepted the responsibility of preparing such estimates. We may, therefore, hope to arrive at and to maintain a consistent standard which will suffice for all reasonable requirements, and will prevent future waste."

Would that there were some prospect of "a consistent standard" in this country! A glance at our splendid fleet of battle-ships and a walk along the forts which defend Boston, New York, San Francisco, or indeed any of our leading seaports, will reveal to the thoughtful man a vast and inexplicable lack of adjustment somewhere.

War-ships are not built to assail defences on shore, he says, as a preface to condemning the attack on San Juan by the American Squadron—our only repulse during the war with Spain. We had not profited by the example of the Japanese in 1894, who "gave proof of their mastery of the lessons of war by consistently declining to expose their war-ships to the fire of coast defences." In 1904, the Japanese displayed a like sagacity, or prudence, if the term appears preferable. Five times did they bombard Port Arthur, but in all these cases they were most careful to avoid risks to their ships. Habitually they drew off when the Russians began to obtain their range. It is through such instances as these that we learn to appreciate the rôle of the man-of-war.

The gist of the matter he sums up in these words:

"The principle is that only ports containing resources of national

importance—resources the destruction of which would directly reduce the capacity of the nation for carrying on war—can be fortified. All other ports must depend upon naval protection alone, and irresponsible threats of bombardment and of the enforcement of indemnities, to which naval manœuvres have accustomed us, can be disregarded. Bombardments would only lead to reprisals, which the superior naval Power can easily carry into effect; while indemnities can only be collected by a process of pillage involving the landing of men.”

The chapters on the evolution of coast batteries and battle-ships are extremely interesting. As treating of fundamentals they merit the careful study of military and naval men.

The criticism of so capable a student of the art of war as Sir George ought to be of great service even to the designer of vessels who might well heed this suggestive hint:

“A well-conceived vessel should continue to be a useful element in a navy as long as her structure remains effective. She may sink in the scale and be forced to accept a lower rôle than that for which she was built; but she will generally be worth maintenance and even rearming. On the other hand, a badly designed ship will quickly become obsolete.”

It is in what Sir George terms the “adjuncts of coast defence” that are found the best examples of good things carried to excess. Remembering what an intolerable nuisance were the torpedoes planted in our various harbors in 1898, we are hardly surprised to read that Great Britain has decided to withdraw mines from her mercantile ports, accepting the lesser evil of the two.

While it is not agreeable to be made use of to point the moral and adorn the tale, we can hardly challenge his accuracy when he says:

“It is folly to run unnecessary risks; but, at the same time, the exaggeration of fixed defence is doubly impolitic—as a waste of public money and as a misdirection of public opinion;”

or again:

“It is the duty of statesmen to insist that [defences] shall be kept within reasonable bounds, to confine the technical expert within limits laid down by authority, and to disregard popular clamor, which here, as in the United States in 1898, is the natural result of ignorance or misreading of the history of war.”

It is in the hands of these very statesmen that this timely work will be able to bring about an extensive and much-needed conservatism, unless Sir George Clarke is hopelessly in error.

A NAVAL OBSERVER.